

ORIGINALITY

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ORIGINALITY is any conception of things, taken immediately from nature, and neither borrowed from, nor common to, others. To deserve this appellation, the copy must be both true and new. But herein lies the difficulty of reconciling a seeming contradiction in the terms of the explanation. For as any thing to be natural must be referable to a consistent principle, and as the face of things is open and familiar to all, how can any imitation be new and striking, without being liable to the charge of extravagance, distortion, and singularity? And, on the other hand, if it has no such peculiar and distinguishing characteristic to set it off, it cannot possibly rise above the level of the trite and common-place. This objection would indeed hold good and be unanswerable, if nature were one thing, or if the eye or mind comprehended the whole of it at a single glance; in which case, if an object had been once seen and copied in the most cursory and mechanical way, there could be no farther addition to, or variation from, this idea, without obliquity and affectation; but nature presents an endless variety of aspects, of which the mind seldom takes in more than a part or than one view at a time; and it is in seizing on this unexplored variety, and giving some one of these new but easily recognised features, in its characteristic essence, and according to the peculiar bent and force of the artist's genius, that true originality consists. Romney, when he was first introduced into Sir Joshua's gallery, said, 'there was something in his portraits which had been never seen in the art before, but which every one must be struck with as true and natural the moment he saw it.' This could not happen if the human face did not admit of being contemplated in several points of view, or if the hand were necessarily faithful to the suggestions of sense. Two things serve to perplex this question; first, the construction of language, from which, as one object is represented by one word, we imagine that it is one thing, and that we can no more conceive differently of the same object than we can pronounce the same word in different ways, without being wrong in all but one of them; secondly, the very nature of our individual impressions puts a deception upon us; for, as we know no more of any given object than we see, we very pardonably conclude that we see the whole of it, and have exhausted inquiry at the first view, since we can never suspect the existence of that which, from our ignorance and incapacity, gives us no intimation of itself. Thus, if we are shown an exact likeness of a face, we give the artist credit chiefly for dexterity of hand; we think that anyone who has eyes can *see a face*; that one person sees it just like another, that there can be no mistake about it (as the object and the image are in our notion the same)—and that if there is any departure from our version of it, it must be purely fantastical and arbitrary. *Multum abludit imago.* We do not look beyond the surface; or rather we do not see into the surface, which contains a labyrinth of difficulties and distinctions, that not all the effects of art, of time, patience, and study, can master and unfold. But let us take this self-evident proposition, the human face, and examine it a little; and we shall soon be convinced what a Proteus, what an inexplicable riddle it is! Ask anyone who thinks he has a perfect idea of the face of his friend, what the shape of his nose or any other feature is, and he will presently find his mistake;—ask a lover to draw his mistress' eyebrow, it is not merely that his hand will fail him, but his memory is at fault both for the form and colour; he may, indeed, dream, and tell you with the poet, that

'Grace is in all her steps, heaven in her eye,
In every gesture, dignity and love':--

but if he wishes to embody his favourite conceit, and to convince any one else of all this by proof positive, he must borrow the painter's aid. When a young artist first begins to make a study from a head, it is well known that he has soon done, because after he has got in a certain general outline and rude masses, as the forehead, the nose, the mouth, the eyes in a general way, he sees no farther, and is obliged to stop; he feels in truth that he has made a very indifferent copy, but is quite at a loss how to supply the defect—after a few months' or a year or two's practice, if he has a real eye for nature and a turn for his art, he can spend whole days in working up the smallest details, in correcting the proportions, in softening the gradations; and does not know when to leave off, till night closes in upon him, and then he sits musing and gazing in the twilight at what remains for his next day's work. Sir Joshua Reynolds used to say, that if he did not finish anyone of his pictures till he saw nothing more to be done to it, he should never leave off. Titian wrote on his pictures, *faciebat*—as much as to say that he was about them, but that it was an endless task. As the mind advances in the knowledge of nature, the horizon of art enlarges and the air refines. Then, in addition to an infinity of details, even in the most common object, there is the variety of form and colour, of light and shade, of character and expression, of the voluptuous, the thoughtful, the grand, the graceful, the grave, the gay, the *I know not what*; which are all to be found (separate or combined) in nature, which sufficiently account for the diversity of art, and to detect and carry off the *spolia opima* of any one of which is the highest praise of human genius and skill—

'Whate'er Lorrain light-touch'd with softening hue,
Or savage Rosa dash'd, or learned Poussin drew.'

All that we meet with in the master-pieces of taste and genius is to be found in the previous capacity of nature; and man, instead of adding to the store, or creating any thing either as to matter or manner, can only draw out a feeble and imperfect transcript, bit by bit, and one appearance after another, according to the peculiar aptitude and affinity that subsists between his mind and some one part. The mind resembles a prism, which untwists the various rays of truth, and displays them by different modes and in several parcels. Enough has been said to vindicate both conditions of originality, which distinguish it from singularity on the one hand and from vulgarity on the other; or to show how a thing may at the same time be both true and new. This novel truth is brought out when it meets with a strong congenial mind—that is, with a mind in the highest degree susceptible of a certain class of impressions, or of a certain kind of beauty or power; and this peculiar strength, congeniality, truth of imagination, or command over a certain part of nature, is, in other words, what is meant by genius. This will serve to show why original inventors have in general (and except in what is mechanical), left so little for their followers to improve upon; for as the original invention implies the utmost stretch and felicity of thought, or the greatest strength and sagacity to discover and dig the ore from the mine of truth, so it is hardly to be expected that a greater degree of capacity should ever arise (than the highest), that a greater mastery should be afterwards obtained in shaping and fashioning the precious materials, than in the first heat and eagerness of discovery; or that, if the capacity were equal, the same scope and opportunity would be left for its exercise in the same field. If the genius were different, it would then seek different objects and a different vent, and

open new paths to fame and excellence, instead of treading in old ones. Hence the well-known observation, that in each particular style or class of art, the greatest works of genius are the earliest. Hence, also, the first productions of men of genius are often their best. What was that something that Romney spoke of in Reynolds's pictures that the world had never seen before, but with which they were enchanted the moment they beheld it, and which both Hoppner and Jackson, with all their merit, have but faintly imitated since? It was a reflection of the artist's mind—an emanation from his character, transferred to the canvass. It was an ease, an amenity, an indolent but anxious satisfaction, a graceful playfulness, belonging to his disposition, and spreading its charm on all around it, attracting what harmonized with, and softening and moulding what repelled it, avoiding every thing hard, stiff, and formal, shrinking from details, reposing on effect, imparting motion to still-life, viewing all things in their gayest, happiest attitudes, and infusing his own spirit into nature as the leaven is kneaded into the dough; but, though the original bias existed in himself, and was thence stamped upon his works, yet the character could neither have been formed without the constant recurrence and pursuit of proper nourishment, nor could it have expressed itself without a reference to those objects, looks, and attitudes in nature, which soothed and assimilated with it. What made Hogarth original and inimitable, but the wonderful redundance, and, as it were, *supererogation* of his genius, which poured the oil of humanity into the wounds and bruises of human nature, redeemed, while it exposed, vice and folly, made deformity pleasing, and turned misfortune into a jest? But could he have done so if there were no enjoyment or wit in a night-cellar, or if the cripple could not dance and sing? No, the moral was in nature; but let no one dare to insist upon it after him, in the same language and with the same pretensions! There was Rembrandt—did he invent the extremes of light and shade, or was he only the first that embodied them? He was so only because his eye drank in light and shade more deeply than anyone before or since; and, therefore, the sunshine hung in liquid drops from his pencil, and the dungeon's gloom hovered over his canvass. Who can think of Correggio without a swimming of the head—the undulating line; the melting grace, the objects advancing and retiring as in a measured dance or solemn harmony! But all this fulness, roundness, and delicacy, existed before in nature, and only found a fit sanctuary in his mind. The breadth and masses of Michael Angelo were studies from nature, which he selected and cast in the mould of his own manly and comprehensive genius. The landscapes of Claude are in a fixed repose, as if nothing could be moved from its place without a violence to harmony and just proportion: in those of Rubens every thing is fluttering and in motion, light and indifferent, as the winds blow where they list. All this is characteristic, original, a different mode of nature, which the artist had the happiness to find out and carry to the utmost point of perfection. It has been laid down that no one paints any thing but his own character, and almost features; and the workman is always to be traced in the work. Mr. Fuseli's figures, if they were like nothing else, were like himself, or resembled the contortions of a dream; Wilkie's have a parochial air; Haydon's are heroical; Sir Thomas's genteel. What Englishman could bear to sit to a French artist? What English artist could hope to succeed in a French coquet? There is not only an individual but a national bias, which is observable in the different schools and productions of art. Mannerism is the bane (though it is the occasional vice) of genius, and is the worst kind of imitation, for it is a man's imitating himself. Many artists go on repeating and caricaturing themselves, till they complain that nature puts them out. Gross plagiarism may consist with great originality. Sterne was a notorious plagiarist, but a true genius. His Corporal Trim, his Uncle Toby, and Mr. Shandy, are to

be found no where else. If Raphael had done nothing but borrow the two figures from Masaccio, it would have been impossible to say a word in his defence: no one has a right to steal, who is not rich enough to be robbed by others. So Milton has borrowed more than almost any other writer; but he has uniformly stamped a character of his own upon it. In what relates to the immediate imitation of nature, people find it difficult to conceive of an opening for originality, inasmuch as they think that they themselves see the whole of nature, and that every other view of it is wrong: in what relates to the productions of imagination or the discoveries of science, as they themselves are totally in the dark, they fancy the whole to be a fabrication, and give the inventor credit for a sort of dealing with the Devil, or some preternatural kind of talent. Poets lay a popular and prescriptive claim to inspiration: the astronomer of old was thought able to conjure with the stars; and the skilful leech, who performed unexpected cures, was condemned for a sorcerer. This is as great an error the other way. The vulgar think there is nothing in what lies on the surface; though the learned only see beyond it by stripping off incumbrances and coming to another surface beneath the first. The difference between art and science is only the difference between the clothed and naked figure: but the veil of truth must be drawn aside before we can distinctly see the face. The physician is qualified to prescribe remedies because he is acquainted with the internal structure of the body, and has studied the symptoms of disorders: the mathematician arrives at his most surprising conclusions by slow and sure steps; and where' he can add discovery to discovery by the very certainty of the hold he has of all the previous links. There is no witchcraft in either case. The invention of the poet is little more than the fertility of a teeming brain—that is, than the number and quantity of associations present to his mind, and the various shapes in which he can turn them without being distracted or losing a 'semblable coherence' of the parts; as the man of observation and reflection strikes out just and unforeseen remarks by taking off the mask of custom and appearances; or by judging for himself of men and things, without taking it for granted that they are what he has hitherto supposed them, or waiting to be told by others what they are. If there were no foundation for an unusual remark in our own consciousness or experience, it would not strike us as a discovery: it would sound like a *jeu-d'esprit*, a whim or oddity, or as flat nonsense. The mere mob, 'the great vulgar and the small,' are not therefore capable of distinguishing between originality and singularity, for they have no idea beyond the commonplace of fashion or custom. Prejudice has no ears either for or against itself; it is alike averse to objections and proofs, for both equally disturb its blind implicit notions of things. Originality is, then, 'the strong conception' of truth and nature 'that the mind groans withal,' and of which it cannot stay to be delivered by authority or example. It is feeling the ground sufficiently firm under one's feet to be able to go alone. Truth is its essence; it is the strongest possible feeling of truth; for it is a secret and instinctive yearning after, and approximation towards it, before it is acknowledged by others, and almost before the mind itself knows what it is. Paradox and eccentricity, on the other hand, show a dearth of originality, as bombast and hyperbole show a dearth of imagination; they are the desperate resources of affectation and want of power. Originality is necessary to genius; for when that which, in the first instance, conferred the character, is afterwards done by rule and routine, it ceases to be genius. To conclude, the value of any work of art or science depends chiefly on the quantity of originality contained in it, and which constitutes either the charm of works of fiction or the improvement to be derived from those of progressive information: But it is not so in matters of opinion, where every individual thinks he can judge for himself, and does not wish to be set right. There is,

consequently, nothing that the world like better than originality of invention, and nothing that they hate worse than originality of thought. Advances in science were formerly regarded with like jealousy, and stigmatised as dangerous by the friends of religion and the state: Galileo was imprisoned in the same town of Florence, where they now preserve his finger pointing to the skies!